

Russia's Orbital Bomb

Defense Secretary McNamara's announcement that the Soviet Union is probably developing an orbital bomb provides discouraging new evidence that the arms race is accelerating. As is his practice, Mr. McNamara spoke in restrained terms, left the door open for possible contrary evidence, and sought to reassure the American people that even if the most pessimistic interpretation of available intelligence material proves correct, this nation's security is still well defended.

But he would not have spoken out publicly in the absence of compelling support for his tentative conclusion. And it is evident that, for all his efforts to discourage response rooted in panic or terror, his words will provide ammunition for those who want the United States to develop its own orbital bomb and otherwise step up research looking toward even more fantastic weapons than those now deployed or in advanced stages of development.

* * *

Two factors, in particular, are likely to accentuate the political and psychological repercussions of the McNamara announcement. One is that it comes only weeks after Washington's decision to begin work on setting up a limited anti-ballistic missile system. That decision, while nominally motivated by concern over China's growing nuclear strength, was also a patent response to fears generated by earlier evidence that deployment of Soviet anti-ballistic missiles had begun.

Second, announcement of the orbital bomb undermines the public confidence born of the Space Treaty that meaningful international agreement had been reached on making space a zone of peace. Now it is plain that there are gaping loopholes in that accord, loopholes which military technologists have no intention of leaving unexploited.

* * *

The entire development provides tragic confirmation of a thesis long maintained by some of the best informed persons associated with the weapons competition of the last two decades. This thesis is that the arms race has increased, rather than cut, the insecurity of all nations.

Secretary McNamara makes it plain that America's military planners must, at best, make their plans on the assumption that they may have a fifteen-minute warning of possible attack through the operation of over-the-horizon radar to detect orbital bombs. The Soviet Union knows that it teeters on the edge of a comparable abyss.

Any recourse to nuclear weapons by either super power means thrust and counterthrust that will leave tens of millions dead on both sides in the first few hours. The danger of disaster grows with the diversity and destructiveness of the bombs. Both countries now have enough "overkill" to wipe out much of the solar system. And nowhere in sight is any road toward agreement on halting the arms race before miscalculation, accident or unforeseen laboratory findings bring irrevocable damage to all mankind.